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Prairie Fever: British Aristocrats in the American West, 1830–1890

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Prairie Fever: British Aristocrats in the American West, 1830–1890, by Peter Pagnamenta. New York: W. W. Norton, 2012. xvii, 338 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$27.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Douglas Firth Anderson is professor of history at Northwestern College (Iowa). He is a coauthor of *Pilgrim Progression: The Protestant Experience in California* (1993).

Peter Pagnamenta's new book begins with Iowa-born Buffalo Bill Cody and his Wild West show in Britain in 1887. Later in the book, the author devotes almost an entire chapter to recounting the English-born Close brothers' (William, Frederick, and James) land operations in northwest Iowa. In his epilogue, Pagnamenta returns to both subjects.

Buffalo Bill Cody and the Close brothers are no strangers to those familiar with Iowa's history. William Franklin Cody has been studied by many over the years, perhaps most comprehensively by Louis S. Warren in *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (2005). The Closes, though far less known than Buffalo Bill, have received book-length attention from Curtis Harnack in *Gentlemen on the Prairie* (1985). Pagnamenta adds nothing new about Cody or the Closes. He does, however, provide a lively narrative of the British elite's fascination with the American West—a West that encompassed Iowa. Cody's Wild West show and Close Brothers, Ltd., capitalized on that fascination.

The author, a British journalist and writer, limits his focus to the British upper classes—the aristocracy, the landed gentry, and the moneyed middle class. While he admits that the numbers of such who visited or emigrated to the United States were small, he rightly points out that “their financial resources, energy, and self-confident behavior gave them significance far beyond their number” (xii–xiii). During the mid- to late nineteenth century, Buffalo Bill was but the latest of a number of Americans to capture the imagination of the British public in general and the elite in particular. Against the backdrop of Anglo-American Romantic sensibilities, authors such as James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, and Francis Parkman and artists such as John James Audubon, George Catlin, Alfred Jacob Miller, and Albert Bierstadt helped infect many British aristocrats with what more than one termed “prairie fever.”

In the 1830s–1850s, the “fever” manifested itself primarily through hunting. In part one of his book, Pagnamenta chronicles the travels—and trophies—of upper-class Britons such as William Drummond Stewart, Charles Murray, George Ruxton, John Palliser, Henry Coke, St. George Gore, and Grantley Berkeley. After the American Civil War, prairie fever's symptoms changed: instead of the upper class largely

hunting for game, they turned to hunting for land. Part two of the book thus features the Earl of Dunraven in Estes Park, Colorado; the colonies of Victoria and Runnymede, Kansas, and Rugby, Tennessee; various ranching endeavors primarily in Texas and Wyoming; and the Close brothers' land interests centered in Plymouth County, Iowa. Pagnamenta in effect argues for the "breaking" of the fever by 1890. The break came in part because of the financial losses in cattle ranching after the notorious summer and winter of 1886–1887. It also came because of the limits set to individual and corporate ownership of U.S. land by the Alien Land Act of 1887. Twin symbols of the fever's passing, the author suggests, were Buffalo Bill's bringing the Wild West show to Britain in 1887 and the death of Frederick Close in a polo accident in Sioux City in 1890.

The strength of Pagnamenta's book is its narrative. The book is delightful to read. More, it convincingly connects varied individuals and developments that have tended to be treated in isolation. While Iowa is most often thought of as part of the Midwest rather than the West, this account makes it clear how for some Britons the northwest Iowa prairies, sparsely settled by 1870, could seem familiarly Anglo-agrarian and exotically American frontier at the same time.

Yet the narrative strength of the book is also its weakness. Narration from primary sources more often than not trumps substantive analysis. Indeed, there is little acknowledgment of other scholarship on anything—the West, Buffalo Bill, American Indians, hunting, farming, ranching, ethnic colonies. Given his narrative emphasis, it is strange that Pagnamenta does not examine John Henry Tunstall, the young British-born New Mexico rancher from a moneyed family whose assassination in 1878 launched the Lincoln County War (the most famous of the war's participants was Billy the Kid, one of Tunstall's cowboys). Since there is no bibliography (perhaps the publisher's decision) and little reference to relevant scholarship in the book's endnotes, one only learns about Harnack's book on the Close brothers in the acknowledgments.

Nonetheless, Pagnamenta's narration of the multifaceted role of upper-class Britons in the development of the American West is of some value. The book offers nothing new as a history, but it can serve to engagingly introduce readers to important players in the shaping of both the mythic and real West of the nineteenth century.